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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001174

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PASS USTR FOR CUTLER, TRICK AND YOO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: PROTESTS PAST PRIME? LEE VOWS "FRESH START"

REF: SEOUL 001145

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: The June 10 anniversary of the 1987 pro-Democracy protests drew record numbers of crowds demanding a renegotiation of the agreement to lift the ban on imports of U.S. beef. The demonstrators remained peaceful, heeding the pleas of the ROKG and former Presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung who urged non-violence. The demands of the protestors were aimed at the Lee Myung-bak administration and generally avoided the anti-Americanism that many feared. Calls for President Lee to step down have not gained traction with the opposition parties and have been derided by political luminaries. President Lee Myung-bak is preparing to shuffle the cabinet and Blue House staff in a bid to demonstrate that he is listening to the people's demands. Meanwhile, the 18th National Assembly is likely to finally open for business next week. End Summary.

Protests Large, Peaceful

12. (SBU) The largest candlelight demonstrations yet against the import of U.S. beef and the Lee government brought hundreds of thousands of protesters to the streets in over 80 cities nationwide on June 10, the 21st anniversary of the beginning of the 1987 pro-democracy uprising. In Seoul, approximately 80,000 (police estimate) to 700,000 (protestors estimate) citizens participated in the candlelight protests against U.S. beef and the Lee Administration. Both the participants and police largely refrained from using violence, although two protestors were arrested for attacking police with lead pipes. An anonymous police officer commented that the actual number of protesters was probably at least 200,000, larger than the 2004 candlelight protests against the presidential impeachment of Roh Moo-hyun (130,000).

13. (SBU) The People's Association for Measures Against Mad Cow Disease held a vigil from 19:30 to call for a complete withdrawal of the beef agreement, an immediate re-negotiation, and judgment on the Lee Myung-bak Administration. Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun showed up at the protest at 19:00 but was jostled, harangued and had to be ushered away from the angry protestors who blame him for the agreement. Meanwhile, conservative groups including

the New Right National Union held rallies calling for restoration of order and quick approval of the KORUS FTA. According to police, these protesters numbered over 7,000.

¶4. (SBU) The police took extra precautions to ensure the protests were as contained as possible. For example, in an unprecedented move, the police erected a 20-foot tall barricade out of shipping containers stacked two high across major roads in front of the Embassy and on all roads leading to the Blue House. Protestors sprayed graffiti on the barriers, climbed the barricades and unfurled banners and flags, but they were unable to move them as they have moved buses in the past (the containers were bolted to the street with rebar and welded to each other). Sejong-ro -- the main road to the Blue House and Embassy -- was closed to vehicular traffic from about 15:30, and there were 40,000 police deployed at major protest sites in Seoul. There were no reports of protestors injured.

Not Anti-American Yet

¶5. (C) The protests continue to avoid anti-Americanism. One of the most vocal opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) lawmakers, Cho Kyung-tae, told poloff repeatedly over a June 10 lunch that the protests were not anti-U.S. Cho said he was in favor of the KORUS FTA but that renegotiation of beef, or at least additional measures, were needed to satisfy UDP supporters. All 81 UDP lawmakers showed up at City Hall to join the protests.

¶6. (C) Nevertheless, ruling Grand National Party (GNP) lawmakers have expressed some worries about the potential impact on U.S.-ROK relations (reftel). Pundits and Assembly contacts expect the protests to peter out in late June.

Roh Moo-hyun: The Last MB Supporter?

¶7. (SBU) Despite protestors demands that Lee Myung-bak be removed from office, opposition groups have avoided joining in that call. Earlier in the week, former progressive President Roh Moo-hyun called these demands "undemocratic" and "unconstitutional." According to several contacts who attended the June 10 protests, aside from some motivated labor union representatives, the protests were oddly without fervor. While a June 7-8 poll Hangil Research Poll noted that 50 percent of respondents hoped Lee Myung-bak would step down, there is no political will (nor the necessary votes) for impeachment, which would have to precede Lee's removal from office.

Heads Will Roll

¶8. (C) Lee is looking to make personnel changes in hope of regaining some of the public's trust. According to Blue House contacts, a new cabinet will be announced once the situation quiets down and possible candidates are being vetted. A Blue House aide to the President told poloff that Lee was still confident he could win back public support but recognized that after such a large turnout against him and his policies, he must make significant changes. In addition to changes in the Blue House staff, the surfeit of rich ministers from the Gyeongsang provinces has made the cabinet an easy target for pundits and the new lineup should be more regionally and economically balanced.

¶9. (C) Another Blue House source told poloff June 11 that the Blue House secretaries would be shuffled as soon as all returned to Korea (several are now in the U.S.) Four of seven senior secretaries and four ministers are set to be sacked, according to the source. Currently, NSA Kim Byung-kook is on the list to leave; FM Yu is given less than a 50 percent chance of surviving.

Tough Break for Lee

¶10. (C) Lee Myung-bak's poor political instincts have been compounded by bad timing. According to Representative Cho, the reason Koreans were frustrated so quickly with Lee was due to a built up frustration with the office of the president. For five years, Cho said, Roh did not listen to the people and now Lee also appears disinterested in paying attention to the voice of the people. In a June 11 interview, Cho suggested Lee establish a hotline so common people could contact the President directly.

Back To Yoido!

¶11. (C) On June 10, Lee Hoi-chang announced his Liberty Forward Party (LFP) would take the fight to the National Assembly and this move to help start the 18th session signaling Lee's willingness to help Lee Myung-bak, according to LFP sources. UDP contacts and press reports note that the UDP will soon announce they will also move to start the Assembly. After the protests, there would be no reason for the UDP to continue to block the start of the 18th National Assembly since all parties had a responsibility to pass laws to help improve people's daily lives, Rep. Cho Kyung-tae told poloff.

¶12. (SBU) There will likely be a floor leaders meeting on June 12 to decide on a start date for the Assembly. A 30-day temporary session would begin soon after the opening of the Assembly that would carry into July. During this session, new ministers could be confirmed and heads of committees could be assigned.

Comment

¶13. (C) The large-scale June 10 protest reflects a growing sentiment that the South Korean Government is -- and has been for some time -- ignoring the demands of the South Korean people, and Lee Myung-bak is bearing the brunt of public dissatisfaction. His inability to defuse the situation reflects his and his advisers' inexperience in appealing to the public. There is a possible end to the "madness." Once the 18th Assembly opens, focus will shift away from Lee and toward Yoido. Some expect that after several months Lee will naturally regain some popularity as the Assembly gets to work. The protests have not generally taken on an anti-American tone, but the ROKG will be unable for some time to make serious moves on alliance issues for fear of reversing that trend. The next test of how long the protests will last will be June 13, the anniversary of the death of two middle school girls who were struck by a vehicle operated by U.S. servicemen in 2002.

VERSHBOW